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Topics & Comments

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On Analyzing Fairy Tales: "Little Red Riding Hood" Revisited

Steven Swann Jones

The analysis of fairy tales is a tricky business. We frequently do not know where the tales came from; it is hard to tell who their audience is or was; and we generally do not have a totally reliable and completely comprehensive collection of authentic texts from the times and places in which the stories have circulated. The most we ever have are hundreds of different versions of a given fairy tale possessing varying authenticity and emanating from various geographical locales. With so much ambiguity and so little continuity in the fairy tale corpus, it is not surprising that the analysis of fairy tales has been a difficult and complicated endeavor. In an attempt to explain fairy tales, numerous divergent analytical approaches have been proposed. Rather than clarifying a confusing situation, this abundance of critical perspectives in its own way contributed to the confusion: now we not only have a bewildering array of fairy tale versions from different ethnic groups, but we also have a baffling assortment of interpretations of these various fairy tales. We are left, as a consequence, with the ticklish task of judging the relative merits of these different interpretations.

A recent instance of the ongoing dispute over the comparative relevance of fairy tale interpretations may be found in an article by Robert Darnton, in which the author strongly objects to psychological interpretations of fairy tales.[1] Darnton reviews psychoanalytic interpretations by Fromm and Bettelheim of Perrault's fairy tale, "Little Red Riding Hood," and reaches this

1. Robert Darnton, "The Meaning of Mother Goose," *The New York Review* (February 2, 1984), 41–47, excerpted from *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 9–74.

Western Folklore 46 (April, 1987): 97–114.

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simple conclusion: "Beware of psychoanalysts" (p. 42). Darnton rejects psychological analysis of fairy tales in favor of an ethnographic/socio-historical approach. He contends that "folk tales are historical documents" (p. 42), and he argues for a critical method that looks "for the way a raconteur adapts an inherited theme to his audience, so that the specificity of time and place shows through the universality of the *topos*" (p. 42). Darnton analyzes a selection of French fairy tales and suggests they communicate a particularly eighteenth-century French ethos and worldview. In contrast, he critiques the "generous view of symbolism" found in the psychological studies, and he rejects their presumption that they know "how the soul works and how it has always worked" (p. 42).

Darnton is not alone in his socio-historical approach to folktale analysis. The intellectual community is filled with ethnographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians who view folklore and its fairy tales as cultural artifacts, as records of social behavior and attitude. However, while they are inclined to see complex cultural meanings and functions of these tales for the group (as charters for social belief and action), they are not so receptive to interpretations of these narratives as portraits of psychological or philosophical concerns of individuals. They question the universality of specific individual concerns and assert instead that fairy tale analysis is meaningful only in the context of the ethnographic analysis of a particular group.

On the other side of the battle line, we have psychologically oriented folklorists like Bettelheim, Ernest Jones, and Alan Dundes, who draw connections between folklore and certain general preoccupations of the human psyche. They see in different narratives and different versions common treatments of basic issues confronting the human species. The psychological approach is premised on the idea that we can use the symbols semiotically encoded in folktale texts to derive interpretations of these texts and that these symbols refer in a substantial way to basic pan-human concerns. Furthermore, while the ethnographic approach is essentially culture-specific, the psychological approach is inherently cross-cultural.

It would seem to me that each approach can produce valuable results concerning human beings and their social and psychological activities. The cross-cultural nature of the psychological approach can show us why the same narratives can appeal to different audiences and what that says about the shared psychology and sociology of those audiences. The culture-specific nature of the ethnographic approach can show us what is unique to individual ethnic groups and how they adapt and modify the broader folk tradition. There would seem to be the need and the space for both approaches in folkloristic research. However, while both approaches have much of value to offer the study of folklore, each has been taken, unfortunately all too frequently, to theoretical extremes by scholars and used in a parochial and narrow-minded way. Darnton is correct in criticizing psychologically oriented folklorists who rely simply on one version for their analysis. Psychological conclusions concerning folklore must be drawn from a comparative analysis of various texts. Unfortunately, Darnton simplistically confuses the methodological failings of certain users of the psychological approach with the approach itself and consequently

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rejects out of hand the entire psychological approach. Furthermore, he himself appears to take his historical, ethnographic approach to certain theoretically questionable extremes. In this essay, I would like to attempt to redress the imbalance fostered by Darnton's essay, by offering a rebuttal to Darnton's narrow-minded criticism of the psychological approach and by pointing out some theoretical shortcomings in his own argument.

To begin, the folkloristic validity of the underlying ethnographic premise as expounded by Darnton—namely, that folktale analysis is meaningful *only* in the context of a particular group—is questionable, given the essentially cross-cultural nature of fairy tales. Fairy tales appear in multiple versions in many different societies. Most folktales, such as "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "Rapunzel," have been found in numerous versions in dozens of cultures. When a fairy tale like "Cinderella," for example, is found in China in the ninth century and France in the eighteenth century, then we have to do more than analyze its "Frenchness" as an explanation of its significance and appeal for its audience. Its larger audience clearly includes more than simply eighteenth-century French peasants, and explanations of its existence require more than ethnocentric analysis of its connection to French culture.

In essence, while fairy tales may indeed be useful for ethnographic description of particular groups (through analyzing their culture-specific renditions of these multi-cultural tales), it is not methodologically sound to reverse the process. We cannot presume to interpret a tale simply on its appearance in one given culture. Fairy tale texts are the product of a cross-cultural oral tradition. The individual versions did not spring up magically; they were spawned by the germinating seed of other versions, which in turn owe their existence to the nebulous concept of the tale type. We cannot ignore the fact that essentially the same folktales, such as "Little Red Riding Hood," that have been found circulating in eighteenth–century France are told by others and appeal to others, and thus the creation and meaning of the French versions of these tales do not belong exclusively to French peasants. To some extent, there is a core meaning that belongs to everyone who retells and enjoys the tale in its different versions. As reader–response criticism of literature argues, a story means what its readers and listeners take to be its meaning; its significance is reflected in their response.

Thus, the analysis of a tale's meaning for one specific audience is only a partial reading. We need to account for as much of the overall audience's response as much as possible. The error in Darnton's logic is ultimately revealed by the fact that the tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" continue to appeal to audiences today, when we are far removed from the Malthusian eighteen-century French society that he proposes as the appropriate context for interpreting those tales.

To summarize Darnton's initial shortcoming, then, as a result of his failure to appreciate the cross-cultural nature of fairy tales, he has an inappropriately limited conception of the wide range of relevant texts and audiences of fairy tales. In essence, Darnton attempts to offer an explanation of the significance of a given fairy tale by focusing exclusively on the appearance of that tale in

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one particular ethnic group, which seems an unnecessarily restricted perspective.

Furthermore, because Darnton's ethnographic approach to fairy tales focuses inappropriately on specific ethnocentric audiences, it tends to overlook the cross-cultural messages of the tales in terms of philosophy and psychology. The primary messages that Darnton sees in the stories are those related to society. However, the status of these tales as multi-cultural documents makes them extremely valuable data for the study of human nature. As evidenced by their cross-cultural appeal, the main focus of their content is not the local events, customs, and concerns of a specific group (unlike other forms of folklore, like gossip, for example); rather, their primary concern is on fantasized depictions of certain experiences, feelings, and attitudes shared by many different individuals in a variety of cultural environments (certain universal *topoi*). Furthermore, fairy tales express these basic concerns in a symbolic language of fantastic images and motifs that can communicate across language and cultural barriers. As a result, these international narratives have a special significance for the study of human nature because they depict situations and concerns that appeal to a large cross section of individuals and not just to the limited members of certain esoteric groups.[2]

Accordingly, Darnton is not justified in ignoring what he refers to as the universality of the *topos* of the fairy tale in favor of the specificity of time and place. The universality of the *topos* is an essential characteristic of the fairy tale; it is a description of the ability of fairy tales to present issues that possess nearly universal appeal. It is a naming of their special emphasis on essential human concerns. It is ironic that Darnton labels so precisely that which he wishes to ignore, for the universality of the *topoi* is exactly what makes fairy tales special; it is what enables them to survive and to be repeated. Since fairy tales possess this special quality, then the most appropriate methodological approach to the analysis of fairy tales would *not* be one that focuses exclusively on one particular regional or cultural manifestation of a given tale, but rather one that investigates and attempts to explicate the universality of their *topoi,* as well.

The essential limitations of Darnton's ethnocentric approach to fairy tale interpretation are most clearly illustrated in his analysis of "Little Red Riding Hood."[3] In his discussion of this fairy tale, Darnton ignores the psychological

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2. For an illustration of this approach, see my analysis of "The Structure of 'Snow White'," *Fabula* 24 (1983): 56–71. Reprinted in an expanded form in R. Bottigheimer, ed., *Fairy Tales and Society* (Philadelphia, 1986). The essential argument underlying the comparative textual approach advocated in this essay is as follows: (1) folktales as phenomena are defined as tale types made up of multiple versions, which frequently appear in multiple cultures; (2) an important part of a given folktale's significance is shared by its various versions, is appreciated by its various audiences, and is derived from its larger tale type; (3) in order to understand or interpret this larger tale type, one must look at a cross section of the different versions, including versions from different cultures if they exist; and finally, (4) one may deduce from the symbolic coincidence found between the motifs and episodes of the different versions its essential humanistic themes. See also Steven Swann Jones, "Structural and Thematic Applications of the Comparative Method: A Case Study of 'The Kind and Unkind Girls'," to be published in a special volume of *Journal of Folklore Research* on the comparative method.

3. Tale type 333 in Aarne and Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* (Helsinki, 1961). They identify the tale as having been collected in over 200 versions in various European and American countries.

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perspective entirely, scoffing at the menstrual associations of the now prevalent, (and, I might add, well received) motif of the red cap, and in effect eliminates the children's audience for this story and any context of children's concerns and development. Instead, Darnton argues that the historical social context of eighteenth-century France provides the exclusive explanation for the existence of this fairy tale. He prefers to place "Little Red Riding Hood" in "a Malthusian society, in which the basic fact of life was the inexorable struggle against death." According to Darnton, "Most Frenchmen lived in or near a state of chronic malnutrition. . . . Of every ten babies born, . . . four or five died by the age of ten. . . . Most Frenchmen inhabited a world that was completely different from ours." This reasoning encourages Darnton to interpret "Little Red Riding Hood" as a reflection of their "nasty, brutish, and short" lives and of their pestilential and morally and economically destitute society. In essence, he concludes that "Little Red Riding Hood" is about the hunger, calamity, and knavery that characterized eighteenth-century France.

The evidence from the various versions in oral tradition seems to indicate, however, that the tale is much more a reflection of a child's development and concerns, and not a reflection of eighteenth-century French peasant society's operation and concerns. The narrative is a great deal more about certain vicissitudes of a young girl's maturation than it is about the savagery of eighteenth-century peasant life. The protagonist is a young girl, not particularly a peasant. Her interactions are entirely with family relations and a wolf; the picture of society is essentially absent. Other folk narratives are far more detailed and explicit in their satiric criticism of customs and manners. Moreover, the young girl's actions are not presented realistically, as they should be if this were to be a realistic cautionary tale; rather, she chats amicably with a wolf and later fails to recognize him in his disguise.

In short, the actions and interactions of the characters are symbolic; audiences do not take them as realistic warnings about the possible dangers in life. How many grandmothers, even in the eighteenth-century, were actually eaten by wolves? Not enough to account for the popularity of "Little Red Riding Hood." But how many children do experience a certain ambivalence about their feelings toward their mother and a certain curiosity and anxiety about what goes on in bed between a man and a woman? Almost every child, I would argue; and thus this tale, through its symbolic language, gives expression to subliminal attitudes in members of the audience concerning the mysterious ritual of sexuality. The mixture of fear, revulsion, curiosity, and attraction that typify children's reactions to the enigma of sexuality are depicted evocatively in the characters and action of "Little Red Riding Hood."

Apparently, Darnton's ethnocentric approach to fairy tale analysis leads him to misinterpret the evidence, as previously noted by Irving Harrison.[4] Harrison points out that much of the evidence that Darnton presents to support his point of view (that "Little Red Riding Hood" was told as an expression of two particularly eighteen-century French concerns—a fantasized wish for a

4. Irving Harrison, "An Exchange on Mother Goose," *The New York Review* (May 10, 1984), 47.

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full belly and a cautious warning about the knavery and treachery of the world as it was at the time) could be used to support other points of view equally well. For example, in the version that Darnton cites at length in his introduction, the elaborate striptease of the heroine before being devoured by the wolf suggests to Harrison that "along with hunger and fear, sex was a fundamental component of the French folktale" (p. 47). We may judge for ourselves how predominantly this theme appears in Darnton's version:

> Once a little girl was told by her mother to bring some bread and milk to her grandmother. As the girl was walking through the forest, a wolf came up to her and asked where she was going.
>
> "To grandmother's house," she replied.
>
> "Which path are you taking, the path of the pins or the path of the needles?"
>
> "The path of the needles."
>
> So the wolf took the path of the pins and arrived first at the house. He killed the grandmother, poured her blood into a bottle, and sliced her flesh onto a platter. Then he got into her nightclothes and waited in bed. Knock, knock.
>
> "Come in, my dear."
>
> "Hello, grandmother, I've brought you some bread and milk."
>
> "Have something yourself, my dear. There is meat and wine in the pantry."
>
> So the little girl ate what was offered, and as she did, a little cat said, "Slut! To eat the flesh and drink the blood of your grandmother!"
>
> Then the wolf said, "Undress and get into bed with me."
>
> "Where shall I put my apron?"
>
> "Throw it on the fire; you won't need it anymore."
>
> For each garment—bodice, skirt, petticoat, and stockings—the girl asked the same question; and each time the wolf answered, "Throw it on the fire; you won't need it anymore."
>
> When the girl got into bed, she said, "Oh grandmother! How hairy you are!"
>
> "It's to keep me warmer, my dear."
>
> "Oh grandmother! What big shoulders you have!"
>
> "It's better for carrying firewood, my dear."
>
> "Oh grandmother! What long nails you have!"
>
> "It's for scratching myself better, my dear."
>
> "Oh grandmother! What big teeth you have!"
>
> "It's for eating you better, my dear."
>
> And he ate her. (p. 41)

As Harrison observes, the striptease of the heroine is entirely too explicit to disregard the sexual innuendoes of this folktale. The blatant invitation to get into bed with the wolf and the suggestive allusions to the sexual power and virility of the wolf (his hairiness, large shoulders, long nails, and big teeth) argue that indeed the central concern of this text is the child's exposure to sexuality, more than it is her wishing for a full belly or warning the audience about the knavery of the world. The tale does not particularly emphasize the wolf's trickiness—there are considerably craftier characters in other folk narratives who illustrate the knavery of the world. Rather, the wolf is remarkably blunt, asking the heroine which route she is taking so that he can take the other, attempting the ludicrous disguise as the heroine's grandmother, and telling the heroine that she will no longer need her clothing. The deception of the wolf is

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highly implausible, for, as James Thurber sagaciously observes, "even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge."[5]

The central focus of this text is on the child's fascination with the wolf's wolfness (which may be read as a thinly veiled metaphor of masculine virility since the distinguishing wolf's features may also apply to mature men), which lures the child into the wolf's bed even though the child realizes that the figure in the bed could not possibly be her grandmother. The tale is really about a child's fascination with what goes on in bed between a man and a woman, and in choosing to ignore this central theme of the fairy tale, Darnton is grossly misreading the evidence. If anything, this French version makes even more explicit the sexual preoccupations of this tale (the cat even calls her a "slut") and confirms for us that the appeal of this version of "Little Red Riding Hood," and all other versions of this tale type, is directly a result of its focus on universal theme of the child's developing awareness of sexuality.

Darnton's misreading of this fairy tale is directly attributable to his misconception of fairy tales as culture-specific documents and to his blinkered disregard for psychological analysis of fairy tales in general. His ethnocentric approach requires him to ignore the possible larger meanings and functions shared by a wide variety of versions of a tale type from different cultures (which are in fact responsible for the dissemination and recreation of specific versions of that tale type) and to look instead for concerns specific to eighteenth-century French peasant culture as an explanation of the popularity of this tale. As a result, Darnton overlooks the most obvious and plausible reason for its appeal to all the audiences in the various cultures in which it has flourished—its appropriately metaphoric and intriguingly euphemistic depiction of youth's universal and eternal fascination with sexuality.

Furthermore, not only does Darnton's ethnocentrism apparently prevent him from conceiving of these texts properly as examples of a larger tale type possessing cross-cultural appeal and cross-cultural meaning, it also apparently encourages him to misperceive in an essential way the entire genre of fairy tales, as evidenced in his conclusions concerning the particular example of "Little Red Riding Hood." According to Jack Zipes, following the research of Paul Delarue, Marc Soriano, and Marianne Rumpf, it does not seem "that the little girl was killed in any of the folk-tale versions."[6] Zipes presents a typical version of "Little Red Riding Hood" that was recorded in Nièvre about 1885 (published originally in Paul Delarue's *Le Conte Populaire Français*) to substantiate his observation.[7] This version, according to the researches of Marc Soriano, has a number of oral elements that "have continued to survive in spite

5. Thurber, "The Little Girl and the Wolf," reprinted in Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (South Hadley, MA, 1983), 210.

6. Zipes, 7. See also Marianne Rumpf, *Rotkäppchen: Eine vergleichende Märchenuntersuchung* (Göttingen, 1951); Paul Delarue, "Le Petite Chaperon Rouge," *Le Conte Populaire Français*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1957), 373–383; Marc Soriano, "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 16 (1968): 429–443.

7. Zipes, 5–6; Delarue, 373–374.

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of the celebrity of the [Perrault] text published in 1697."[8] These include the motif of the blood and flesh of grandmother being eaten by the heroine, the animal that tells the child what she is eating, the ritual undressing of the heroine (all of which are found, by the way, in the folk version cited by Darnton), and finally, the happy ending of the heroine's escape (which is not found in Darnton's version). The Nièvre text presents all of these elements:

There was a woman who had made some bread. She said to her daughter: "Go carry this hot loaf and a bottle of milk to your granny."

So the little girl departed. At the crossway she met *bzou,* the werewolf, who said to her:

"Where are you going?"

"I'm taking this hot loaf and a bottle of milk to my granny."

"What path are you taking," said the werewolf, "the path of needles or the path of pins?"

"The path of needles," the little girl said.

"All right, then I'll take the path of pins."

The little girl entertained herself by gathering needles. Meanwhile the werewolf arrived at the grandmother's house, killed her, put some of her meat in the cupboard and a bottle of her blood on the shelf. The little girl arrived and knocked at the door.

"Push the door," said the werewolf, "it's barred by a piece of wet straw."

"Good day, granny. I've brought you a hot loaf of bread and a bottle of milk."

"Put it in the cupboard, my child. Take some of the meat which is inside and the bottle of wine on the shelf."

After she had eaten, there was a little cat which said: "Phooey! . . . A slut is she who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her granny."

"Undress yourself, my child," the werewolf said, "and come lie down beside me."

"Where should I put my apron?"

"Throw it into the fire, my child, you won't be needing it anymore."

And each time she asked where she should put all her other clothes, the bodice, the dress, the petticoat, and the long stockings, the wolf responded:

"Throw them into the fire, my child, you won't be needing them any more."

When she laid herself down in the bed, the little girl said:

"Oh, Granny, how hairy you are!"

"The better to keep myself warm, my child!"

"Oh, Granny, what big nails you have!"

"The better to scratch me with, my child!"

"Oh, Granny, what big shoulders you have!"

"The better to carry the firewood, my child!"

"Oh, Granny, what big ears you have!"

"The better to hear you with, my child!"

"Oh, Granny, what big nostrils you have!"

"The better to snuff my tobacco with, my child!"

"Oh, Granny, what a big mouth you have!"

"The better to eat you with, my child!"

"Oh, Granny, I've got to go badly. Let me go outside."

8. Soriano, "From Tales of Warning to Formulettes: The Oral Tradition in French Children's Literature," *Yale French Studies* 43 (1969): 24–43.

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"Do it in the bed, my child!"
"Oh, no, Granny, I want to go outside."
"All right, but make it quick."
The werewolf attached a woolen rope to her foot and let her go outside.
When the little girl was outside, she tied the end of the rope to a plum tree in the courtyard. The werewolf became impatient and said: "Are you making a load out there? Are you making a load?"
When he realized that nobody was answering him, he jumped out of bed and saw that the little girl had escaped. He followed her but arrived at her house just at the moment she entered.

Notice how similar Darnton's version is to Delarue's; Darnton's version appears to be a slightly different account that has been discreetly bowdlerized. The happy ending, which is "built on the scatological overtone of the 'tie which sets free' (the little girl pretends that she urgently needs to relieve herself, as a pretext to escape from the monster)," has been eliminated.[9] Instead, in the version that Darnton chooses to focus on, we have a truncated text with a neat Puritanical ending that appears to support nicely Darnton's interpretation of the moral of "Little Red Riding Hood": "Stay away from wolves."

Darnton claims that "more than half of the thirty-five recorded versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood' end like the version" that he recounts and that "the happy endings were grafted onto [this folktale] after the eighteen-century" (p. 45). Accordingly, Darnton apparently believes he can ignore these other versions and their distinctly different endings. He concludes that the folktale of "Little Red Riding Hood" is about "the inscrutable, inexorable character of [the] calamity" of the heroine's walking into the jaws of death, and accordingly, that this tale illustrates his contention that eighteenth-century French folktales primarily focused on depicting the knavery and treachery of the world.

Darnton's logic is suspect here. From our familiarity with the prevalence of happy endings in folk fairy tales (they are in essence a definitional feature of that genre), it seems more reasonable to conclude, as Soriano does, that the motif of the heroine's scatological escape and happy ending are authentic components of the folktale in oral tradition (given the folk's proclivity for scatological humor, also, which is more pronounced than in the literary tradition's use), and that the abrupt endings with the heroine's death are either literary adaptations or oral tales of a different variety, moral tales designed to teach an explicit lesson. Thus, as a result of his theoretically inappropriate bias towards a culture-specific reading of fairy tales, Darnton essentially misconceives the genre of fairy tales in general, and he misreads the meaning of "Little Red Riding Hood" in particular.

All in all, in the case of "Little Red Riding Hood," the conclusions produced by Darnton's extremist application of the ethnographic approach seem less relevant and convincing than the conclusions of the psychological approach. The motifs and symbols of this folktale are the prima facie evidence, and they seem to focus on the developmental concerns of children. From the point of

9. Ibid., 27–28.

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view of a literary scholar, any interpretation advanced about a specific text must be supported by the evidence in the text. Darnton's ethnographic conclusions seem only marginally reflected in "Little Red Riding Hood." They are far less supported than the psychological interpretations he so cavalierly dismisses.

Ultimately, the basic argument refuting Darnton's point of view is that certain forms of folklore, such as fairy tales, exist both in specific ethnic cultures and in a larger cultural tradition that transcends the specific ethnic communities (for example, folktales circulate within specific ethnic groups, sometimes as oicotypes, and they also circulate between different ethnic groups), and thus they require analysis on both levels. Furthermore, the primary data for analyzing the significance of folk narratives comes from the narratives themselves, their systematic use of language and literary devices, of images, symbols, characters, and plots to tell a story and convey a message. Folk narratives are part of a larger tradition of literary expression that has been produced by the larger cultural community, and this folk literary tradition provides a crucial context for interpreting the tales.

The problem with attempts to interpret folktales solely within specific ethnic contexts is that the reason that many of these folktales exist in the form that they do and to the extent that they do is because of their ability to cross ethnic boundaries. Folktales have the special ability to treat issues and speak to concerns that are important to a great many people. The form that the folktales may take in answering our deepest questions may indeed be colored by the ethnic peculiarities of a particular audience. But when we are dealing with tales existing in a multiplicity of cultures, then we have a right, indeed, a methodological duty, to look beyond the specific culture to the cross-cultural context of human experience, thought, and concern in its broadest sense to find an explanation of those tales.

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On the Meanings of Mother Goose

Elliott Oring

Steven Jones's essay unfolds in two directions: on the one hand, it is a critique of a specific ethno-historic reading of French folktales by historian Robert Darnton; on the other, it is an argument for a cross-cultural, symbolic program for folktale interpretation. In fact, these two arguments may be only

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